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ABSTRACT

A study investigated patterns of interaction in college classroom discourse involved in small group work. Specifically, it looked at two discourse sequences: Question-Answer-Comment (Q-A-C) and Question-Counter Question-Answer-Comment (Q-CQ-A-C). Instances of the latter are closely considered in the context in which they occur, and an attempt is made to link the nature of classroom talk to the larger concern of classroom dynamics. Data are drawn from two transcribed university-level English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) classes. An opinion is that despite the fact that students in small group are able to self-select freely, the exchange structure characteristic of this interaction remains traditional in nature. Examination of one case within the data in which the counter-questioning move in Q-CQ-A-C sequence is generally absent, and the resulting classroom discourse becomes markedly less traditionally pedagogical in nature. Contains 12 references. (Author/MSE)

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Exchange Structure in the ESL Classroom: Q-A-C and Q-CQ-A-C Sequences in Small Group Interaction

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This paper begins by briefly reviewing the literature related to classroom discourse structure and proceeds to explore how specific findings in the literature are reflected in two transcribed university-level ESL classes which were involved in small group work. More specifically, "Question-Answer-Comment" (Q-A-C) sequences are identified, as are a significant derivation thereof: "Question-Counter Question-Answer-Comment" (Q-CQ-A-C) sequences. Instances of the latter are closely considered in the contexts in which they occur, and an attempt is made to link the nature of classroom talk to the larger concern of classroom dynamics. It is argued that despite the fact that students involved in small group work are able to freely self-select, the exchange structure characteristic of this interaction remains traditional in nature. Finally, one case within the data is examined where the counter questioning move in the Q-CQ-A-C sequence is generally absent; as a result, the classroom discourse here becomes markedly less traditionally pedagogical in nature.

To communicate in the classroom is to play a kind of language game: this game "is a goal-oriented activity involving moves by one or more players, mutual dependence and constraint among moves, and [it involves] the need for strategy and tactics" (Jacobs, 1986, p. 151). Inherent in our ability to identify classroom talk as one of many "games" included in the larger entity that is discourse is the fact that we understand how this game as distinct from others is played. The purpose of this paper is to examine how specific findings in the literature are made manifest in two transcribed ESL lessons.[1] I am particularly interested in how certain "rules of the game" are or are not adhered to by the players and I will, as a result, pay close attention to what are referred to by McHoul (1978) as "Question-Answer-Comment" (QAC) exchange sequences, and, importantly, the derivations thereof. It is my contention that they exist in the data cases of

interactional modifications which result in a variant of the QAC sequence; namely that of the Q-CQ-A-C sequence, or "Question-Counter Question-Answer-Comment" sequence. I would like to suggest ways in which these two exchange structures may relate to classroom dynamics. Finally, I will conclude by examining one case in the data where the exchange structure looks decidedly less pedagogic than conversational in its orientation. This example is significant in that it suggests a quite different dynamic in the classroom.

Classroom talk, as part of a larger domain known as institutional or formal talk, is best understood as it exists in relation to ordinary talk. It is via this comparative focus that the features unique to classroom talk are brought into relief. In keeping with Goffman's (1974) observation that utterances are "anchored in the surrounding, ongoing world" (p. 500), recent studies of institutional interaction reveal that while resembling ordinary talk in many ways, institutional talk is governed by considerations of "task, equity, efficiency, etc. in ways that mundane conversational practices manifestly are not" (Heritage, 1988, p. 34). Significantly, what becomes central to the identification of institutional talk as distinct from ordinary talk is its turn-taking system.

Like ordinary conversational interaction, institutional interaction is understood as being managed on a turn-by-turn basis (Zimmerman, 1987). This form of management, however, is modified in an institutional setting where factors such as "rights and obligations and differential patterns of opportunity and power" (Heritage, 1988, p. 34) have a strong bearing upon the interaction. Thus, rooted in the resulting modification is a situation whereby, according to Heritage (1988),

> the incumbents of particular roles (e.g. doctor, teacher, lawyer, interviewer) ask questions and, where relevant, select next speakers, while others (e.g. patients, pupils, witnesses, interviewees) are largely confined to answering them (p. 34).

How this role-related "question-answer-mediated-turn-taking" (Heritage, 1988, p. 34) influences the management of classroom talk is of key importance here.

McHoul (1978) maintains that the management of classroom talk is ruled by the distribution of differential participation rights in classrooms. He argues that "only teachers can direct speakership in any creative way" (McHoul, 1978, p.188). Notably, this does not mean that students cannot direct speakership they can but the nature of student-directed speakership is not creative: after having typically been first selected by the teacher, they can then select only to continue their turn, or select the teacher; the student is thus not granted the permutability which allows the teacher to creatively select any speaker (McHoul, 1978). Therefore, as Heritage (1988) asserts, the "relatively restricted patterns of conduct

characteristic of [the classroom] are primarily the product of turn-type pre-allocation" (p. 34). In other words, the teacher alone has what Long (1983) refers to as the "predetermined ability to control topic and speaker" (p. 11). Jacobs (1986) notes that both teacher and student are tacitly aware of these rules and "have the ability to more or less artfully play the game" (p. 151).

This conversational dance assumes a particular rhythm which again works to distinguish classroom talk from ordinary talk. More specifically, where turns in ordinary talk are often organized as question-answer (Q-A) utterance or adjacency pairs (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974), turns in the classroom are most often organized as question-answer-comment (Q-A-C) "utterance triads" (McHoul, 1978, p.191); importantly, McHoul sees only teachers as having the right to comment on the sufficiency of an answer once it has been produced, although this C-part is ultimately optional. He provides in his commentary some examples of C-parts, such as the one below, which is for both teacher and student striking in its familiarity:

Excerpt 1

1		T:	Yes Denise
2		D:	I think em firstly there prob'ly be residential along
3			the em railway but then -- later on that land would
4			increase in *value* and the businesses would prob'ly
5			buy the people out.
6	C	T:	Very good answer.
7			(1.0)
8	C	T:	n quite correct. (McHoul, 1978, p. 191)

As Allright and Bailey (1991) maintain, this C-part, or evaluative feedback on the form of an utterance "is not what we expect in normal, non-teaching conversation" (p. 98). It is, however, in combination with the initial Q-A, recognized as being a ubiquitous element in classroom talk; as a result, interaction analysts spend a great deal of time identifying and describing the symmetry of the Q-A-C sequence.

Stubbs (1983) concurs that the Q-A-C sequence is "particularly applicable to teacher-pupil interaction" (p. 131) He argues that the traditional lesson provides the basis for a "consensus model" in which there is an agreement between teachers and students about the norms and conventions inherent in that context (p. 135). Certainly, what is explicit in much of the literature surrounding the topic of classroom talk in traditional, teacher-fronted classrooms where the teacher is the obvious "director" or "head" is the attitude that this talk is at bottom an expression

of power inequalities; Long (1983) calls it 'unequal power' discourse" (p. 11). At the root of this power imbalance is the general understanding that there exists an unequal distribution of knowledge between teacher and students. Müller (1988) writes that common expectations which both students and teachers share minimally involve expectations where "the teacher [is] 'the one who knows' (the primary knower) [...] and the students [are] the 'ones who do not know' (the secondary knowers)" (p. 315). Fundamental to the nature of discourse in the traditional classroom, then, is the sense that knowledge is somehow the property of the teacher.

Several interaction analysts make reference to the fact that when the teacher is not clearly acting in his or her traditional role as "head" of a teacher-fronted class, and when, instead, the class consists of small group work activities, the nature of classroom discourse may be modified to a certain degree. Stubbs (1983), for example, questions whether or not the organization of exchanges would be as pronounced in less traditional lessons where "clear status and power relations" are not immediately apparent, if there at all (p. 134); he goes on to suggest the possibility that students and teachers in a less highly controlled context may have "different views about how discourse could and should develop" (p. 135). It appears to rarely be the case, however, that the discourse of the classroom traditional or not diverges from the classic model of classroom talk to such an extent that the interaction and thus the participants' roles become unrecognizable. Much of the following will support this contention, although included in the final segment of this paper is a discussion of additional data which is illustrative of a more conversational orientation to classroom discourse.

The data in this paper largely works to underscore the fact that, though engaged in small group work, the teacher usually works very consistently at maintaining her role as the "primary knower" whenever there is a chance of becoming, like her students, a hearer and, by extension, a "secondary knower."[2] She is thus reluctant to relinquish her right to manage the discourse when her students attempt to creatively distribute turns. The exchange structure which results is variant in that it could best be described as Q-CQ-A-C, the CQ being an important move on the teacher's part, whereby her right to direct the discourse is made most explicit. In this way, the class remains in one way quite traditional in that although it is not technically speaking teacher-fronted and students may self-select the capacity to direct the discourse is retained by the teacher. In an attempt to support this finding, let us now take a closer look at the data.

What is immediately significant with regard to the nature of group work here is that the students and not the teacher are self-selecting in order to ask questions of the teacher. The situation where the teacher directs discussion and allocates

questions is thus inverted as the students conduct their own discussions and encounter their own questions. The following example illustrates this process:

Excerpt 2

```
1        L12:  <h> Mary
2        T:    yeah
3  Q     L12:  what's the meaning of (+) Ausch[v]itz?
4  CQ    T:    d'uhm does anybody here know what Auschwitz was?
5  A     L6:   yeah //concentration camp//
6        T:         //you want to explain it//
7                (+)
8        T:    //explain it to her//
9        L6:   //Ausch[v]itz
10       T:    explain it to Hiroko
```

Note that L12's question at line 3 sets the teacher up, so to speak, to provide an answer; this then leaves the student in the position to comment on or evaluate the teacher's response.[3] The teacher's next turn at line 4, however, works to fundamentally reshape the structure of the exchange. The teacher responds to L12's question with a counter question which re-allocates L12's question to the group--this re-allocating move is one which only the teacher has the right to make, and by so doing she thereby re-positions herself within the exchange structure so that she is in the position to comment upon a response and is not, instead, the one whose response may be commented upon. In fact, the teacher does not comment on L6's answer at line 5, although, significantly, her capacity to do so was secured by her counter-questioning move at line 4.

The teacher employs this discourse strategy on a number of occasions in the lesson where a Q-A-C exchange is initiated by a student's self-selected question. In the following example (Excerpt 3), we can see that the teacher makes two attempts to modify the potential student-initiated Q-A-C exchange with a second "CQ" part; the first attempt, which involves re-allocating this "CQ" part to the small group at line 3, is unsuccessful as no one within the group can respond; necessarily, then, the teacher re-directs her question once again at line 8, this time to the entire class. What follows is a rather long but not a typical exchange whereby the teacher prompts a student whose reply is incomplete; her turns at lines 11 and 14 are commenting turns insofar as they evaluate the incomplete nature of L5's answers, and ask for more information. Mehan (1978) writes that when a student gives a partial or incorrect answer, carefully directed teacher-student interaction continues until the correct answer appears, which it does at line 19.

Excerpt 3

```
1   Q L8:   uh Mary (+) uhm what's ideology means
2           (++)
3  CQ  T:   ideology. (++) does anybody know? (+) here.  (+) uh did you
4           ask
5           (++)
6     L8:   //yeah I//asked (+) I asked her
7     L7:   //uh huh//
8  CQ  T:   ok who knows what an ideology is? (1) does anybody know what
9           an ideology is?
10    L5:   thought,
11C//Q T:   a //what?//
12    L8:      //what?//
13 A  L5:   a kind of thought,
14C//Q T:   a kind of thought  what kind of u:h-  //what kind// of
15          thought
16    L8:                                          //idea?//
17 Q   T:   it be (+) for example (+) give an example of //an ideology//
18    L7:                                           ///((unintelligible))//
19 A  L5:   o:h u:hm socialist, (+) communist, (+) democracy is a-
20     T:   can you hear tell (+) tell her
```

Most of the time, as we have seen, when faced with a student's question the teacher is able to modify the ensuing discourse by inserting a "CQ" part into the exchange. Only once does she need to defend, in a sense, her right to manage the discourse. Consider the first part of the extended exchange:

Excerpt 4

```
1      L9:   Mary? ((formally))
2      T:    uh huh?
3      L9:   your input plea// (h huh //huh//huh)//
4      T:                              //huh//
5      L11:              // (h huh //huh//huh// huh) <huh>
6   Q  L9:   there is this e::h (+) some sort of an idiom you pretend to
7           pay us and we pretend to work
8  CQ  T:   ok.  what do you think that could be: (+) do you have any
9                idea?
10     L11:  do you know what the word pretend means
11          (++)
12     T:    do I  know what the word pretend means
13     L11:  yeah (+) I- I doubt (+) I don't know that see
14 CQ T:     oh ok who - do - does anybody know what the word pretend
15          means.
16     L5:   //pretend?//
17     L6:   //pretend?//
18     L8:   pret(h)e:nd? ((L8 sounds disbelieving))
19     L7:   //pretend?//
20 A   L6:   //pretend// to be (+) like you're trying to show something
21          from
22          you that u:h
23 A   L9:   is not?
24 A   L6:   is actually not you
25          (+)
26     L11:  a::h
27     L5:   pretend
28     L11:  ok
```

What is surprising in Excerpt 4 is L11's decision to respond to the teacher's counter question at lines 8 and 9 with a question of his own, "Do you know what the word pretend means?" at line 10. This represents a violation of the turn-taking rules for classroom talk which, as we have seen and according to McHoul (1978), "permit and oblige the teacher and only the teacher to initially instigate a topic or topics and, from there on, to maintain or change that topic or topics" (p. 203). The teacher's response at line 12, "Do *I* know what pretend means?" another question is asked in an attempt to allow the student to in some way repair the situation, which he does by admitting his ignorance in the matter at line 13. The teacher then exercises her right to go on, securing her true second "CQ" part at line 14, and the discourse continues smoothly.

It is interesting to consider the exchange which immediately follows Excerpt 4 The teacher, whose role as the primary knower and director of the discourse was momentarily undermined by L11's apparent disregard for the conventions of classroom talk at line 10, again uses, as in Excerpt 3, a series of prompts to now very carefully manage the direction of the discourse. These occur at lines 10, 15, 19, and 23. As the Q-A-C sequences emerge at lines 15, 17, 19, 22, and 23, the familiar symmetry of the exchange structure typical of the classroom becomes recognizable. By virtue of the teacher's involvement here, the interaction becomes much more traditionally pedagogic in nature insofar as the teacher designates both topic and speaker.

Excerpt 5

```
1      L11:  but I mean //(huh)// I don't know the meaning (h huh huh)
2                                                          //<huh>//
3       L9:                          //(huh huh)//
4        T:                                                  //ok//
5            //think// about it think read the sentence //again//
6      L11:   //anyway//                          //yeah yeah//
7        T:  with that idea
8      L11:  yeah yeah, ((louder))
9            (9)
10  Q   T:  ok (+) Rein- Reinhard it's a criticism of what . (+) d'you
11               know what it could be possibly a criticism of,
12           (+)
13  A L11:  of the communism
14           (+)
15 C//Q T:  but what aspect
16           (2)
17  A L11:  of not being a free market there
18           (+)
19 C//Q T:  u::hm (+) yeah (+) but specifically what sector
20           (1)
21     L11:  //((cough))//
22  A   L9:  //<hhh>// the wor- the working class maybe
23 C//Q T:  the working class ok (+) when (+) the working class is not
24           in a free market and what happens (+) when you work for the
25           state?
26     L11:  yeah (+) okay
27           (10)
```

Despite the predominance of the Q-CQ-A-C sequence in the class transcriptions examined, teachers did not always respond to students' self-selected questions with a counter question of their own. In other words, they did not always move in such a way as to grant themselves the opportunity to closely direct the subsequent interaction. What happens when teachers do not employ Q-CQ-AC sequences is also extremely interesting, and, not surprisingly, this particular conversational dance also affects the rhythm of classroom dynamics. Consider the following exchange:

Excerpt 6

```
1 Q   L6:   what ehspur ((spur)) means?  how do you pronounce it
2           s-p-u-r ((L6 spells the word out))
3 A   T:    spu:r
4     L6:   spur=
5     T:    =//uh huh, <h>//
6 Q   L6:   //what does this mean.//
7     T:    can I see the sentence?
8     L6:   sure
9     T:    it depends on (1) uh::m (1) where was it again down
10          here somewhere (+)
11    L6:   it's supposed to be here (+) uh:m (++) <hhh>
12    L5:   (hhhhh) ((L5 laughs under his breath))
13    L6:   uh:: oh, oh. (+) yeah its here
14          (+)
15 A  T:    ok (3) to: in this case it's to encourage
16          (+)
17    L6:   to en//courage//
18    T:        //to ((unintelligible)) (into)// courage <hh>
19 Q  L6    does it have another meaning too
20 A  T:    yeah you know uh on a ho:rse (+) uhm (+) when you're riding
21          (+) you have on you::r (hh) (+) on your shoe a sp//ur//
22    L6:                                                   //yeah//
23 A  T:    and you use that to:
24    L6:   ok//I understand//
25 A  T:      //make the horse// go faster <hhh> it comes from
26                                                  //there it's//
27    L6:                                           //excuse me//
28 A  T:    called a spu:r (+) and so the verb (1) here to spur would be
29          to encourage
30 Q  L6:   so is it //a: verb//
31    L5:           //<hhh>//
32 Q  L6:   and noun too yeah=
33 A  T:    =yeah a spur (+) //is//
34    L6:                    //sp//ur=
35 A  T:    on your shoe=
36    L6:   =is a noun
37          (+)
38 A  T:    and to spur- it could be to spur or to spur on is to
39          encourage
40    L6:   so you pronounce it ehspur ((spur))
41    T:    spur (+) uh //huh//
42    L6:              //ok//
```

In sharp contrast to excerpt 5, here the student does the questioning, and the teacher does the answering. And, most notably, the teacher provides these answers without first countering with a question of her own. As the student self-selects again and again, at lines 1, 6, 19, 30, and 32, the direction of the discourse is very clearly in his hands as he succeeds in designating the topic with each self-initiated question. What results is a series of adjacency pairs whereby the teacher in a sense relinquishes her right as primary knower to more carefully manage the discourse. In this more conversationally-oriented exchange, the issues of power and status usually associated with classroom talk are far more subtle, particularly insofar as the student is able to control the topic, traditionally the sole domain of the teacher.

The goal of the analyst is ultimately to discover the orderliness inherent in various exchanges like the ones above by, according to Zimmerman (1987), examining "collections of comparable conversational materials in which similarly shaped and situated utterances can be shown to have similar consequences or to function in the manner claimed" (p. 419). Continued work with small group interaction in the classroom is sure to give rise to a better understanding of the structures of modified classroom discourse associated with it. As the rules of this game become clearer, so should the effects discourse structure has on classroom dynamics. By extension, this research should lead to important insights regarding classroom methodology and Second Language Acquisition research.

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THE AUTHOR

Jane Nicholls is a Canadian international student currently enrolled in the MATESL Program in the Division of English as an International Language at UIUC. Her interests include: Conversation Analysis as it relates to Second Language Acquisition; Language Planning in Canada; and the sociolinguistic dimensions of Multiculturalism in Canada.

NOTES

[1] I would like to thank Dr. Numa Markee for generously providing me with these transcribed lessons.

[2] McHoul in his analysis of formal talk in the classroom finds that within the classic model where Q-A-C sequences reign, teachers, because of their right to creatively distribute turns, are able to operate "without [the] fear of becoming hearers" (p. 192).

[3] An interesting question to raise at this point relates to how frequently students do in fact comment on the teacher's answer if given the opportunity to do so; to the best of my knowledge, this question remains as yet unanswered. It represents, however, a fascinating line of inquiry within the relatively new area of research into small group interaction in classrooms.

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Appendix 1
Transcription conventions (from Markee, in press)

T:	: teacher
L1, L2, etc.	: identified learner
L	: unidentified learner
L3?	: probably learner 3 (L3)
LL	: several or all learners simultaneously
/yes//yah//ok	: overlapping or simultaneous listening
///huh?///oh///	: responses, brief comments, etc., by two, three, or an unspecified number of learners
=	: a) turn continues below, at the next identical symbol b) if inserted at the end of one speaker's turn and the beginning of the next speaker's adjacent turn, it indicates that there is no gap at all between the two turns
(+) (++) (+++)	: pauses; (+) = a pause of between .1 and .5 of a second; (++) = a pause of between .6 and .9 of a second; and (1) (2) (3) = pauses of one, two, or three seconds respectively.
?	: rising intonation, not necessarily a question
!	: strong emphasis with falling intonation
OK. now. well., etc.	: a period indicates falling (final) intonation
so, the next thing	: a comma indicates low-rising intonation suggesting continuation
e:r, the:::, etc.	: one or more colons indicate the lengthening of the precedeing sound
emphasis	: italic type indicates marked stress
SYLVIA	: capitals indicate increased volume
. . . . (radio)	: single brackets indicate unclear or probable item
((unintelligible)), ((coughs))	: double brackets indicate (a stretch of) unintelligible text (approximate length indicated), or comments about the transcript, including non-verbal actions
no-	: a hyphen indicates an abrupt cut-off, with level pitch
yesterday Peter went	: capitals are used only for proper names, not to indicate beginnings of sentences
[si:m]	: square brackets indicate phonetic transcription
<hhh>	: in-drawn breath
hhh	: exhaled breath
(hhh)	: laughter tokens
*	: schismatic turns (i.e. a conversation that is separate from the main interaction)
†L11: //yeah// I †T: //yeah.//	: overlaps worked out from different tape sources where the precise overlaps are inaudible but can be estimated by listening to the surrounding interaction

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